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RESISTANCE ELEMENT FOR POTENTIOMETRIC DEVICES, AND METHOD OF MANUFACTURE

INS B1>

This invention pertains generally to variable resistors and, more particularly, to a conductive plastic resistance element for use in potentiometric devices, and to a method of manufacturing the same.

INS B2>

In potentiometers and other types of variable resistors, the rubbing action between the so-called wiper contacts and the resistive elements can change the topography or surface contour of the resistive elements over the lifetime of the devices. Such changes produce variations in resistance between the contacts and the resistive elements, and those variations can result in disturbances and erroneous readings in sensors and other instruments in which the potentiometers are utilized.

With conductive plastic resistance elements, there is relatively little wear on the elements, but there is a slight smoothing or polishing in the areas which are contacted by the wipers. This removes surface protrusions and decreases effective contact pressure, resulting in increased electrical resistance or noise between the resistance element and the wiper contact. In addition, a thin film of insulating material may form on the surface of the element due to the presence of lubricants and plastic material in the element.

Heretofore, the most widely used technique for reducing contact resistance variations with conductive plastic resistance elements has been to increase the contact pressure and to use a silicone lubricant between the wiper and the resistance element.

With other types of resistive elements, variations in contact resistance have been reduced by embedding particles of conductive material in the surface of the resistive element which is engaged by the wiper contact. U.S. Patents 4,278,725 and 4,824,694, for example, show the use of conductive particles in cermet resistive elements, *i.e.* elements containing a mixture of ceramic and metallic materials. Such techniques have not, however, heretofore been employed in conductive plastic resistance elements.

It is in general an object of the invention to provide a new and improved resistance element for use in potentiometric devices, and to a method of manufacturing the same.

Another object of the invention is to provide a resistance element and method of the above character which overcome the limitations and disadvantages of conductive plastic resistance elements of the prior art.

These and other objects are achieved in accordance with the invention by providing a conductive plastic resistance element having particles of conductive material embedded therein and projecting therefrom for contact by the wiper of a potentiometric device in which the resistance element is employed. The resistance element is made by processing carbon powder, resin, solvent and conductive phases to form a paste, applying the paste to a substrate, and curing the paste to drive off the solvent and form a film, with the conductive phases rising to the surface of the film and becoming embedded therein.

A conductive plastic resistance element is made by combining carbon powder with a resin and solvent mixture, along with other fillers, wetting agents, and other components. These materials are mixed in a high shear mixer to form a viscous paste which is then screen printed onto a substrate and cured at temperatures on the order of 200°C. The curing operation drives off the solvents and crosslinks the plastic matrix to form a hard, abrasion resistant

film. Carbon is the current carrying phase, and a higher percentage of carbon produces a cured film of lower resistance.

It has been found that electrical noise or variations in contact resistance can be significantly reduced by including conductive phases in the carbon/plastic matrix. One presently preferred conductor for this purpose is silver, particularly a deagglomerated spherical silver powder having a particle size of about 6.0 μm or less.

This silver is preferred because it has smooth, generally round particles that will not absorb excessive amounts of solvent in the mixture for the conductive plastic resistor material. In addition, the round shape promotes good electrical contact without excessively lowering the resistance value of the material. This is in contrast to flaked materials which tend to join together in a matrix of such materials and lower the resistance value significantly. The silver has a further advantage in that it is less costly than other materials such as palladium, gold or platinum.

It is believed that other metals such as palladium, gold, platinum and copper can be used in place of or in addition to silver. It is also believed that other metals and other conductive materials such as highly conductive forms of carbon can also be used. As noted above, however, silver is the preferred material because the silver particles enhance the conductivity between the wiper and the resistive element without degrading the wear properties of the element or producing major changes in its resistance value.

Ins B4 >

Another example of a material which has been used with good results is a mixture of silver and palladium in the form of a high purity, spherical, deagglomerated coprecipitated powder containing about 70 percent silver and 30 percent palladium. Such a powder is available from Degussa Corporation, South Plainfield, New Jersey, under the product code K7030-10. This powder has properties similar to silver in reducing contact resistance

variation, but it does have an effect on the resistance and a minor effect on the wear properties of the resistive element.

The amount and shape of the conductive phases is dependent to some extent on the contact resistance desired and on the type of contact used in the potentiometric device, and it is generally preferable that the amount of conductive material not be so great as to produce undesired changes in the electrical and mechanical properties of the resistance element. It has been found that the addition of about 10 to 20 percent silver or other metal (by weight) will significantly reduce the variation in contact resistance or surface conductivity without degrading the wear properties and overall resistance of the conductive plastic material. However, it is believed that useful range of added conductive phases extends from about 2 percent to about 50 percent (by weight).

In one presently preferred embodiment, the resistance element is manufactured by processing carbon powder, resin, solvent and conductive phases in a high shear mixer to form a paste, screen printing the paste onto a substrate, curing the paste at a temperature on the order of 200°C to drive off the solvent and form a film, with the conductive phases rising to the surface of the film and becoming embedded therein.

Example

20 grams of a deagglomerated spherical silver powder having a particle size of about 6.0 μm or less were mixed with 80 grams of resistor ink comprising a suspension of carbon, boron nitride, and polytetrafluoroethylene powders in a solution of phenol resin in a mixture of butyl carbitol acetate and butyl carbitol.

The mixture was processed on a 3 roll mill using 150 pounds of roller pressure and two passes to thoroughly distribute the silver particles in the

mixture. This ink was then printed onto a substrate and cured at a temperature of 200°C for two hours.

The resistive element was tested and compared with another element made from the same ink without the silver particles. After 750,000 strokes with a wiper, the element with the silver particles had a contact resistance variation of only 1000 ohms, as compared with 6000 ohms for the element without the silver. Similar results were obtained after a 1.5 million strokes.

It is apparent from the foregoing that a new and improved conductive plastic resistance element and method of manufacture have been provided. While only certain presently preferred embodiments have been described in detail, as will be apparent to those familiar with the art, certain changes and modifications can be made without departing from the scope of the invention as defined by the following claims.